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# **Info-active and Info-passive: The New Type of Consumer Classification**

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## **Abstract**

**Social media platforms, that foster user generated content, have altered the ways consumers search for product related information. Conducting online searches, reading product reviews, and comparing products ratings, is becoming a more common information seeking pathway. This research demonstrates that info-active consumers are becoming less reliant on information provided by retailers or manufacturers, hence marketing generated online content may have a reduced impact on their purchasing behaviour. The results of this study indicate that beyond traditional methods of segmenting consumers, in the online context, new classifications such as info-active and info-passive would be beneficial in digital marketing. This cross-sectional, mixed-methods study is based on 43 in-depth interviews and an online survey with 500 consumers from 30 countries.**

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*Key words: digital marketing, social media, consumer behaviour, consumer segmentation, user generated content, marketing generated content, info-searching styles, electronic word-of-mouth, purchasing decision-making.*

*Track: Digital Marketing and Social Media*

## 1.0 Introduction

Social media platforms, at first, seemed an attractive playground for many companies who rushed into it only to be there first in the ongoing race for consumers' attention. These companies suffered from a phenomenon called "technology ecstasy – a supreme love for newly developed technology" (Gunning, 2009, p.18). But only a few brands were successful in engaging consumers, while a majority use it to broadcast messages with little or no interaction with their audiences. Traditionally users utilised the Internet to read and watch content, or purchase products and services (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). It is also suggested that the Internet may socially bind people from diverse locations (Becker and Mark, 2002), and help people cope with different problems (Barak *et al.*, 2008). However, from marketing communication point of view, the crucial aspect of social media is to support interactions with brands by allowing consumers to recommend products or services and post reviews (Orr and Bush, 2007; O'Leary and Sheehan, 2008; Dwyer, 2007). This is typically achieved by engaging consumers in conversations about brands, in evaluating products and disseminating those evaluations. In marketing, this practice is known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and relates to different types of user generated content (UGC) such as: consumer created product reviews, ratings, and recommendations. The reach, magnitude and impact of eWOM on consumers are not yet thoroughly researched within the context of online marketing communication, although numerous studies have explored similar issues like: the value of online product reviews in forecasting sales, the impact on box office revenues, WOM marketing in online communities (Dellarocas *et al.*, 2007; Liu, 2006; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). This study examines the aspect of online consumer behaviour in social media spaces that fosters creation and posting of UGC. It explains this behaviour by using the model of info-active and info-passive searching types, clearly depicting two very opposite types – with numerous variations in-between the two polarities.

## 2.0 Literature review

Digital technologies had an irreversible impact on marketing practices, especially in the area of consumer behaviour, integrated communications, customer relationship, data management, branding, marketing governance, multichannel marketing and marketing optimisation (Chaffey, 2010). In the context of social media spaces that offer a plethora of market niches and various consumer clusters, the importance of understanding consumer behaviour, their personalities, usage of search engines, and the impact of intermediaries (content aggregators, social networks, mainstream media publishers and bloggers) may be vital for the development of a digital strategy (Chaffey *et al.*, 2009).

The traditional marketing method for segmentation of consumers was based on demographic, geographic, psychographic, and behavioural characteristics (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980; Lumpkin, 1985; Lesser and Hughes, 1986). Later studies that have looked at typologies of consumers within the context of online shopping have identified factors such as price sensitivity, involvement, purchasing intention, and choice of retailing channels (Chiang and Dholakia, 2003; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Brengman *et al.*, 2005; Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007). Barns *et al.* (2007) clustered Internet shoppers according to their personal shopping traits and cultural factors: risk-averse doubters (reserved and sceptical towards new experiences), open-minded online shoppers (high trust in online vendors), and reserved information seekers (use the Internet mainly for information search). Purchasing choices are greatly influenced by firsthand experiences or reliable advice from others, while trust, reputation and truthfulness are crucial for online interactions between people, brands and organisations (Eisenegger, 2009; Whitty and Joinson, 2008; Myskja, 2011; Massum *et al.*,

2011). In this context, the component of trust is somewhat missing from online interactions (Dreyfus, 2009). While professional persuaders may mask their messages as word-of-mouth from peers (Levine, 2003), the reliability of online information sources becomes increasingly important in the context of info-search and purchasing decision-making (Gligorijevic, 2011). The behavioural component of consumers' online practices presented in this paper assists in understanding what marketing communication messages, marketing generated content (MGC) or user generated content, are influencing consumers and impacting their purchasing decisions.

### **3.0 Methodology of research**

This international study utilised a mixed research method (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Plano-Clark and Creswell, 2008) and was a combination of a qualitative and a quantitative study. This methodology allowed “use of different types of [research] methods at different levels of data aggregation” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, p.18) and as such allowed better integration of findings. The qualitative component encompassed 43 in-depth interviews with online shoppers. The quantitative online survey collected 500 responses from respondents in different countries, namely consumers of digital technology products (high-involvement purchases) that have recently conducted product related online information searches. Both studies were conducted internationally, collecting data from respondents in Australia, Europe, North and South America and Asia.

The interviewees for the qualitative study were recruited using the snowballing recruitment method, utilising the researcher's personal contacts to enlist frequent Internet shoppers in different countries. This study deployed a purposeful sampling technique, recruiting respondents that had conducted a recent online purchase and had previous experience with UGC and eWOM. The sample was divided into four age groups of mixed genders. The respondents had different socio-economic backgrounds, education levels and professions. For the purposes of this study a semi-structured discussion guide was developed, using Hinkle's laddering technique, exploring subordinate and superordinate constructs and their relationships according to respondents' perceptions within the context of their recent shopping experience (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The interview questions included topics such as: recent purchases of digital technology products (DTP), use of online information sources to learn about DTP, websites visited, types of UGC, preferred formats of UGC, eWOM practices, participation in dissemination of eWOM, trust, reputation, and reliability of UGC. The responses to online survey were collected from participants from over 30 countries, utilising purposeful sampling – recent purchases or intentions to purchase a DTP. The viral distribution method, or viral sampling, was utilised to disseminate the survey link via computer mediated communication channels (Plowright, 2011), where the recipients were asked to pass on the invitation to interested parties. This was accomplished by utilising emailing lists, promotions in electronic newsletters and online forums (by editors and communities' managers), and advertising on a social networking website – Facebook.

### **4.0 Findings**

This study captured an apparent polarity of online searching styles among respondents. Although the model displays many variations between these two types, the clustering was at the poles of the scale – indicating that consumers' online searching styles strongly diverge when looking for information on DTP while considering a purchase. This model (Figure 1) depicts the consumption of UGC, in the form of product reviews and ratings, during the information search phase of the purchasing decision-making process.

**Info-active** types are vigorous online researchers, well informed, acquainted with different types of online content, skilled in finding relevant information, using search engines listings and comparing rankings of websites, and frequently visiting websites that keep them informed and updated about news and products. Their online information searching time was overall longer than of the opposite type, and in some cases lasted several weeks. They were familiar with numerous websites that specialised in DTP, were able to provide their exact names and web addresses, and were overall less reliant on search engines. For this group of consumers the published online content was only the starting point in the information assessment process. They would further evaluate the reputation of websites, the quality of its published content, the reliability of the published information and users' profiles (history and number of previous posts, topics of previous posts, writing style, quality of presented facts, relatedness to discussed topic, and true or false identity).

**Info-passive** consumers are more reliant on search engines, less keen to conduct long searching sessions, are superficially informed about new products – mostly what they have learnt from advertising or heard from their friends and acquaintances. They do not consume all types of UGC alike, preferring simple formats over those that require more attention to details or may be time consuming (such as threads in online forums). These consumers perceived longer forms of UGC as being somewhat less useful than the info-active consumers, and preferred shorter forms and product ratings. They were not concerned about the quality of user created product reviews, they did not question the origin of posted content (with regards to phony or shill reviews), and were not apprehensive about the type of websites on which they read product related information. Within this group a certain level of unawareness of stealth marketing practices was noticed. It was also found that blogs were not popular within this group, or used in their information search paths. To some extent, online forums were also neglected as potential sources of information. The time devoted to online research about products was significantly shorter in this group, as well as the number of product reviews read before forming opinions (approximately five reviews). They mostly used only the first two pages of listings from search engines.

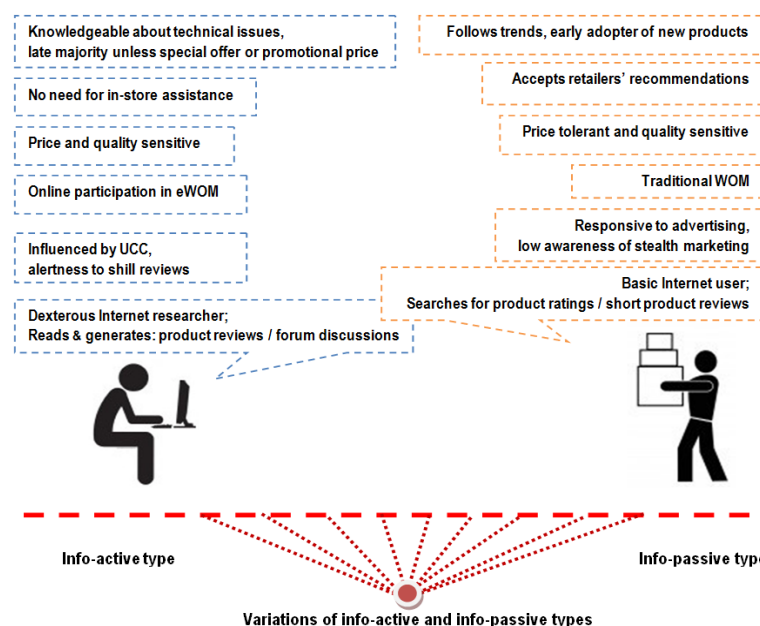


Figure 1: Two types of info-searching styles in the context of the purchasing decision-making process

These opposite styles, with variations between those two extremes, indicate strong differentiation in engagement and consumption of UGC. Different info-searching styles among consumers also indicate dissimilar attention to trustworthiness of content, reliability of information sources, helpfulness, ambiguity of information and other aspects in regards to credibility of content. While spending more time reading user created product evaluations the exposure to UGC is longer, hence the influence on info-active consumers is potentially stronger. In the case of info-passive consumers, the influence of brief reviewing forms (ratings, short recommendations) had a more significant effect. They prefer face-to-face word-of-mouth (recommendations) from people they know and suggestions from retailers, if convinced they were prepared to pay the top price. To them, the influence of online content was less essential to their purchasing decisions. Another significant difference between those two types of consumers is in the area of creation and posting of product reviews and ratings. While **info-active** consumers extensively search online, they also contribute to the evaluation of products by posting UGC. **Info-passive** types found writing of product reviews to be time consuming. Considering that a substantial number of product reviews are already available online, they did not find it necessary for every consumer to contribute. Hence, within this group the online participation rates were low or none.

Further, the online survey revealed high utilisation rates of search engines (72 percent) as a starting point of online searches. The most prevalent destinations for posting opinions and evaluations of products were: social networks and online communities (42 percent), retailing websites (31 percent), media/news websites and blogs (13 percent), manufacturing websites (8 percent), online reviewing websites (3 percent), and personal blogs (3 percent). Within those categories, the most popular websites for posting product evaluations were social networking websites and online communities, explicitly: Facebook and Twitter; retail stores Amazon and eBay; media news and blogs where comments and recommendations from consumers are encouraged. The least utilised social media websites for posting content were reviewing websites (e.g., Choice, Digital Photography Review) and personal blogs. These results demonstrate that a considerable number of consumers evaluated products on social networking websites and not on product reviews websites that are specifically designed for this purpose. Consumers did not perceive this process as posting of online content, but as chatting with their friends and peers. Overall these results explain the aspect of consumers' online information searching behaviour, the implications for the marketing theory and industry will be explained next.

## 5.0 Conclusions

The results of this study are relevant to the demystification of users' online behaviour during information search, consumption and posting of UGC, and its influence on consumers' purchasing decisions. The new model of consumers' searching style, **info-active** or dexterous researchers and **info-passive** or inert users of online content, depicts a new aspect of consumer behaviour in the social media milieu. This model provides a new classification of consumers based on their product related online information search practices, something that previous studies have indicated, but not fully identified (Chiang and Dholakia, 2003; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Brengman *et al.*, 2005; Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2007; Barns *et al.*, 2007). Further, the info-active and info-passive model allows a more appropriate segmentation of consumers in regards to their sensitivity to and influence of MGC and UGC on their decision-making. Further, this study indicated that the impact of UGC on info-active consumers is mainly due to longer exposure to this type of content, preference towards elaborate forms of product reviews, level of understanding of stealth marketing practices, and developed methods of how

to reveal their truthfulness. For info-passive consumers shorter forms of UGC, such as product ratings, may influence their purchasing decisions. Recommendations from friends, acquaintances or even shopping assistants may yield even stronger influence.

This type of new consumer segmentation allows marketers to develop a marketing mix for each variation of info-searching types. The best approach to reach info-active consumers is to have a comprehensive social media strategy, an in-house social media team that will monitor social media websites and respond to consumers' product related inquiries and questions, and a high brand presence on websites that foster UGC such as online retailing sites (Amazon and eBay), online forums, blogosphere, and e-zines. To engage with info-passive consumers, a traditional marketing approach would be considerably more effective. Having highly rated products, recommendations from retailers and in-store advertising may be more influential in comparison to longer forms of UGC (elaborate product reviews, threads in online discussions) that were not very appealing to this type of consumer. Strong reputation and brand presence on social networking sites (Facebook and Twitter) is recommended for both types of consumers. However, controlling the initiation, dissemination and reach of eWOM in this environment is a difficult task and requires large teams and expertise. The mere presence of brands in this space is barely effective in persuading consumer to buy products, unless the marketers manage to engage consumers in online participation via creation and posting of UGC or eWOM.

At the general level, the findings presented here describe uses of Internet content and information consumption within the category of DTP, but are widely applicable to other high-involvement product categories and industries for example: travel and leisure, health, education, financial services. For the marketing and advertising industries it elucidates consumer behaviour and current trends in social media – where consumers look for product reviews, ratings and recommendations and how they influence their purchasing decisions. The new consumer segmentation type, info-active and info-passive searching styles, helps marketers to develop suitable strategies for a variety of market niches that flourish on social media websites.

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